

Chapter 15

A Comparative Perspective

Why and under what conditions are honors programs in higher education developed in 11 northern European countries? And what is the current situation regarding talent development in those countries? These were the central questions posed in the introduction of this book. Eleven countries were studied. They were grouped into the Benelux countries, the Nordic countries, and the German-speaking countries.

In this final part, consisting of three chapters, we provide answers and conclusions. In this chapter, we compare the culture towards excellence and the development of honors programs in the countries, before moving on to an analysis of the development of programs in the next chapter. In the final chapter, we provide different perspectives, a look into the future, and suggestions for further research. First, we present our most important findings.

15.1 Countries Compared

We reviewed the special provisions for talented students at 303 higher education institutions in 11 countries, with almost four million students altogether. All in all, honors programs are found to be up and running at 72 HEIs in six countries (see Table 15.1).

Over half of all institutions with honors programs are situated in the Netherlands. Many of the Dutch HEIs run more than one program, so the Dutch share in the total number of programs is probably even higher. Germany, which accounts for around half of the total population of all countries in this book, has around a quarter of the HEIs with honors programs. Belgium, Denmark, Finland, and Austria divide the remaining quarter. The Finnish programs are all very small, so we qualify honors development there as low. In the Netherlands, development is high and the other countries with programs qualify as medium (see Map 15.1).

Table 15.1 Honors programs at HEIs per country, overview 2014

Country	HEIs researched in total ^a	HEIs with honors programs
Austria	22	3
Belgium	11	4
Denmark	16	6
Finland	14	3
Germany	110	17
Iceland	7	0
Luxembourg	1	0
Netherlands	52	39
Norway	18	0
Sweden	31	0
Switzerland	21	0
<i>Total</i>	<i>303</i>	<i>72</i>

^aExplanation of the number of researched HEIs can be found in the methodology chapter and the respective country chapters

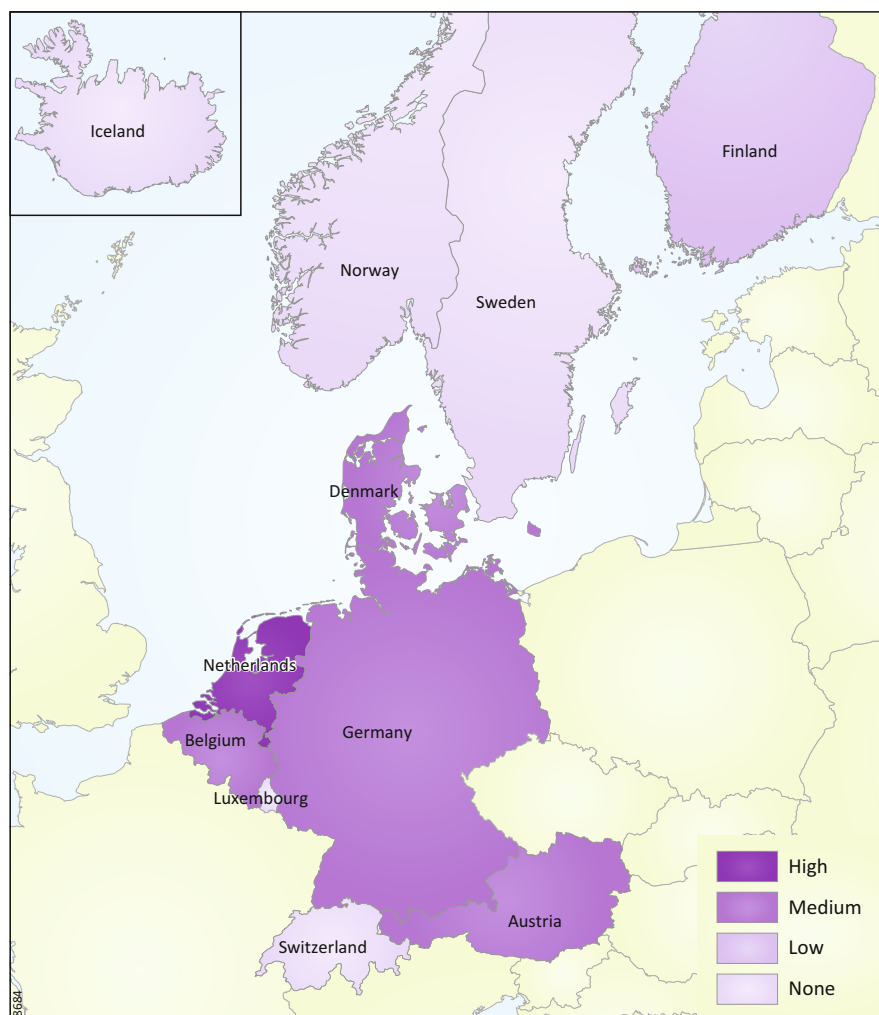
We now put this result in broader context. It is important to note that in the table and on the map showing honors programs in different countries, we focus on the HEIs offering honors education. We do not have the exact comparable details about the number of individual programs and student numbers nor about very important factors such as the content of the programs or the program goals.

However, we do have information about the culture towards excellence in all countries. We first summarize these results for the three clusters of countries. Then we will compare the selectiveness of the education system in general and university admission in particular throughout the 11 countries.

15.1.1 *The Benelux Countries*

Starting in the *Benelux*, we have seen that all Benelux countries share a system of relatively unrestricted access to higher education. In *the Netherlands*, all research universities and most universities of applied sciences have set up one or more honors programs for their students over the last 20 years. Government subsidies through the national Sirius Programme have supported this development. This has led to a rich landscape of honors programs, with different aims, objectives, and results. Programs have established themselves firmly in most HEIs. Programs at 14 research universities and 25 out of 37 universities of applied sciences were discussed.¹ As Sirius subsidies have ended in 2014, HEIs are now looking for new ways to finance their honors education.

¹ **Note:** The private Theological University of the Reformed Churches Kampen (TUK) was added as 52nd Dutch HEI.



Map 15.1 Honors programs in European higher education, 2014

In *Belgium*, the education system is not governed at the national level but by the Flemish-, French-, and German-speaking communities. Our findings suggest that focus on excellence is stronger in the Flemish community than in the French community. In both communities, it is hardly supported by policy or funding. Honors education in Belgian HEIs has started to develop in recent years, mostly in Flanders, where they have taken Dutch programs as an example. In total, we found six programs at four universities out of 11 Belgian universities in total.

Luxembourg is a small country with only one university, founded in 2003. Education is shaped by multilingualism and an international focus. We found no honors programs.

15.1.2 *The Nordic Countries*

Moving to the *Nordic countries*, we see a strong egalitarian tradition. Common heritage, culture, and educational tradition lead to a comparable view towards excellence. In all five countries, education is offered free at all levels, including higher education; and compulsory education is organized in only one type of school (single-structure education). In spite of the strong egalitarian culture, higher education admission is usually restricted. Selection is based on grades or an entrance exam, sometimes combined with other criteria.

In *Denmark*, the Nordic egalitarian tradition is strong, but attitudes towards excellence have changed in recent years. In the early 2000s, the government started to prioritize talent development. Focus has mostly been on creating provisions for secondary school children, and for master students. There are also interesting programs linking secondary and higher education. Until recently, there was little development for excellent undergraduate students. However, programs are now in place at six HEIs (out of 16). A new law creates more legal room for talent development at all levels. Finally, the Nordic Talent Network uniting researchers interested in talent support and excellence in education was founded in Denmark in 2013.

In *Norway*, providing equal opportunities is a central thought in education policy. This principle has led to a system where differentiation according to academic ability is effectively prohibited by law, frowned upon by society, and thus virtually nonexistent. No honors programs were found at the country's 18 universities and specialized university colleges. However, recent developments including a new government, worrying PISA results, and changing opinions in the other Nordic countries might lead to a change in this situation in the near future. Programs to support Centers of Excellence in research and education are already in place. So far these programs focus on the identification of excellent institutions and not on excellent students.

Sweden has a very egalitarian culture and this is reflected in its education policy. There is hardly any differentiation, except in the system of private schools that exists alongside the state education system. An important development is that Swedish results in PISA have steadily declined. In the 2012 survey, Sweden reached the lowest scores of all European OECD countries. These worrying results will probably lead to change in the education system in the near future and might lead to a more welcoming approach to excellence initiatives. Some experimental initiatives in upper secondary education were found, but no honors programs at the 31 higher education institutions.

Finland's education system served as an example to many countries in the last decade, because of its high scores in international reports such as PISA. Primary and secondary education teachers are highly educated, and schools are well organized and include options for talented students. Entrance to higher education is very selective. At HEIs, honors programs are still rare. We found three small-scale programs at 14 Finnish universities. Finland was surprised by relatively disappointing results in the 2012 PISA report. This has led to a discussion about education policy, but not to major changes yet.

Finally, *Iceland* is still recovering from the massive blow in 2008, when the banking system collapsed and economic and political unrest followed. Focus has been on getting the country back on track. Education is deemed very important by tradition, but especially in this situation. The small higher education sector with seven institutions has recently been reformed. Special programs for talented students have not (yet) been developed.

15.1.3 The German-Speaking Countries

The *German-speaking countries* of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland are federal states. In the school system, children are streamed according to academic abilities at an early age. Provisions for talented and gifted children in primary and secondary education are present, sometimes inside the school system but mostly alongside. These provisions are supported by nationwide organizations such as ÖZBF in Austria. Another feature found throughout the German-speaking countries is the role of private foundations in the sponsoring of individual talented youngsters. Sometimes these foundations also organize programs for “their” talents as a group.

Germany has an extensive network for support of talented children and students. This is mainly organized in individualized support. In higher education, it works mostly through grant programs, which are at least partly financed by private foundations. In recent years, both companies and students themselves have started to form online communities and organizations focusing on providing opportunities to excellent students. Another important development is the “Excellence Initiative” for research, which started in 2005. This highly successful program has brought the concept of excellence to the university system, generated a lot of attention, stimulated research, and led to a culture change in the universities, which are now more focused on competition. The development of honors programs differs regionally and is somewhat limited by legal restrictions, although some universities find creative solutions for this problem. Among the 110 German universities, 17 universities with honors programs were identified. The state of Bavaria is a front-runner, with the Elite Network of Bavaria which includes eight universities running honors programs.

In *Austria*, excellence in education is a subject attracting much attention in recent years. The influential Austrian Research and Support Center for the Gifted and Talented (ÖZBF) has released different articles and reports aimed at a systemic and inclusive approach towards education for the gifted and talented, and this has found its way into politics. However, focus so far is mostly on children in primary and secondary schools. This includes a focus on giftedness in different teacher education programs. Programs in higher education are still rare: we identified four programs at three universities (out of 22). This might soon change, as different players involved in honors-related subjects do see the need for the development of honors programs in higher education. This process is influenced by the rapid growth of the higher education sector: between 2002 and 2011, the number of Austrians in tertiary education increased by 55 %.

Finally, the country of *Switzerland* is a patchwork: four languages are spoken, 26 cantons each have their own education system, and the government model is complex. Provisions for talented and gifted students in primary and secondary education are well developed and stand in a relatively long tradition. There is a focus on giftedness in research and in teacher education. Honors programs have not yet been developed at the country's 21 HEIs, but recent developments indicate this might change in the near future.

15.2 Talent Provisions Throughout Education Systems

Having indicated how the culture towards excellence in all countries can be characterized, we now compare two aspects that are relevant for the development of honors education in a certain country: first, the provisions for gifted and talented young people throughout the education system and, second, the selectiveness of higher education entry.

We see a relatively clear picture when we look at the development of special schools or classes for talented pupils in compulsory education per country, as is summarized in Table 15.2. Reading each country's entry from left to right, we move through the education system.

Table 15.2 Provisions for talented and gifted students and selectiveness of education system per country, overview 2014

Country	Compulsory education: special schools or classes ^a	Compulsory education: legislation (2009) ^b	Selectiveness of education system at age 15 ^c	Selectiveness of higher education entry
Austria	Yes	Yes	High	Low
Belgium	Yes	Mixed	High	Low
Denmark	Yes	Yes	Low	Medium/high
Finland	Yes	No	Low	High
Germany	Yes	Yes	High	Medium
Iceland	No	No	Low	Low/medium
Luxembourg	No	?	High	Low
Netherlands	Yes	Yes	High	Low
Norway	No	Yes	Low	Medium/high
Sweden	Experimental	No	Low	Medium/high
Switzerland	Yes	Yes	High	Low

^aThis refers to special schools or classes within schools for talented or gifted students

^bThis refers to special legislative measures for talented and/or gifted students. Source: European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2009)

^cThe age of 15 was chosen for this indicator because this is the highest age at which education is compulsory in all countries in this book and also because the often-referred-to PISA report assesses 15-year-olds

In most countries, such schools or classes have developed, with the exception of Norway (which forbids permanent differentiation according to academic ability by law) and the small countries of Iceland and Luxembourg. Legislation for talented or gifted students is in place in all countries except in some Nordic ones, with a strong egalitarian tradition.

We see that countries differ in the degree and timing of selectiveness, but they all select students at some point. In the Benelux countries, first selection takes place early. For example, in the Netherlands, pupils are divided in three main types of secondary education around the age of 12. Pupils then continue towards the national exam at the end of secondary school. If they pass this exam at the vwo level, they can enter most study programs at the university level. With some exceptions, programs only have general admission guidelines and no fixed number of students.

All the Nordic countries have a low level of selectivity at age 15, as they offer single-structure compulsory education. In contrast, selectiveness of higher education entry is medium or high in these countries.

15.3 Selectiveness of Higher Education Entry

We now move to the second aspect: the selectiveness of higher education entry. This can be a very relevant factor for the development of honors programs and is therefore worth a closer look. We have chosen a number of indicators about the selectiveness of higher education entry. Results are shown in Table 15.3.

Table 15.3 Selectiveness of higher education entry per country, overview 2014

Country	Most used way of entry ^a	No. of studies with restricted entry	Restrictions set by	Selection criteria	Examples of restricted/most competitive study paths
Austria	Secondary school diploma	Few	Ministry or HEI	Entrance exam	Medicine, veterinary medicine, dentistry, psychology, journalism
Belgium	Sec. school diploma	Few	Community ministries	Admission test	Dent., med., vet. med., physiotherapy
Denmark	Sec. school diploma	All (in practice, most)	HEI + ministry	Highest exam GPA qualifies	Med., psych., business administration

(continued)

Table 15.3 (continued)

Country	Most used way of entry ^a	No. of studies with restricted entry	Restrictions set by	Selection criteria	Examples of restricted/most competitive study paths
Finland	Entrance exam	All	HEI + ministry	Entrance exam grades, highest qualify	Psych., education, med, vet. med.
Germany	Sec. school diploma	Most (over half) ^b	Federal ministry or Länder ministries or HEI	Various (set by HEI), often based on grades and waiting time	Med., vet. med., dent., pharmacy
Iceland	Sec. school diploma	Some	HEI	Set per study, usually entrance exam	Med., law, economics
Luxembourg	Sec. school diploma	Some	HEI	Depends on study (grades, interview, motivation)	n/a
Netherlands	Sec. school diploma	Few	Ministry or HEI	Exam GPA, weighted draw, criteria set by HEI	Med., vet. med., dent., journalism
Norway	Sec. school diploma	All (in practice, most)	HEI + ministry	National point system, mostly based on grades	Med., dent., psych.
Sweden	Sec. school grades + national admission test	All (in practice, most)	HEI + ministry	Grades, test, criteria set by HEI	n/a
Switzerland	Sec. school diploma	Few	HEI	Entrance exam	Med., vet. med, dent.

Based on Eurydice (2014)

^aAlternative entry routes are available in most countries (e.g., age requirement plus entrance exam, work experience plus entrance exam, etc.), but we focus on the “regular” path from secondary to higher education. Arts and sports study courses are excluded. They have restricted entry in all countries

^bOnly applies to universities; for Fachhochschulen, different admission procedures apply

We see that student numbers are restricted to some extent in all countries. However, in the Benelux and the German-speaking countries, the restrictions only apply to a few study programs, usually including medicine and related disciplines. The Nordic countries generally restrict entry to all programs by limiting the number of student seats available. In Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, not all student seats

in all programs are filled, but it can be very hard to get into popular programs. Selection is coordinated nationally and based on exam GPA (Denmark), a point system mostly based on grades (Norway) and a system based on grades, a national test, and other criteria (Sweden). Finland is exceptional: here, a national entrance exam is taken for every study program and admission is based on these exam results. Competition for places in popular programs is fierce.

In this chapter, we compared the provision of honors programs at 303 higher education institutions in eleven European countries. Overall, we see a trend of more provisions for talented and motivated students. While there are many differences between countries, there are also similarities within the clusters of countries, suggesting that a similar language and/or culture produces a comparable view towards excellence. In most countries, attitudes and culture become more supportive of excellence. However, only a fraction of the four million students attending those HEIs is participating in honors programs. So, more focus on talent development and more provisions for honors education are needed if we want to educate those talented and motivated students to their full potential. In the next chapter, we will discuss our results and the implications of our findings.

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